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INTRODUCTION

The tales of King Arthur and his Knights are of Celtic origin. The Celts were the people who occupied Britain at the time when the history of the country opens, and a few words are necessary to explain why the characters in the stories act and speak as though they belonged to a later age.

It is believed that King Arthur lived in the sixth century, just after the Romans withdrew from Britain, and when the Britons, left to defend themselves against the attacks of the marauding Saxons, rose and defeated them at Mount Badon, securing to themselves peace for many years. It was probably about this time that King Arthur and his company of Knights performed the deeds which were to become the themes of stories and lays for generations afterwards.

In olden times, it was the custom of minstrels and story-tellers to travel through the land from court to court, telling of tales of chivalry and heroism, and for many centuries the tales of King Arthur formed the stock from which the story-teller drew.

In this way the stories came to be handed down from father to son, in Brittany (whose people are of the same family as the Welsh) as well as in Wales and England, and by this means alone were they prevented from being lost. But in the reigns of Henry II and Richard I, they were set down on paper, and so became literature. Before this, however, a British writer had written out some of the tales, and from him as well as from the lips of the bards and story-tellers of their own generation, the writers in the time of Henry II. were able to collect their information.

Now, it will be remembered that the second and third crusades were being carried on during the reigns of Henry II and Richard I, and many English and French Knights were therefore fighting in the fields of Palestine.

The story-teller, whose living depended on the welcome his stories met with, instead of telling them according to tradition, altered them to suit the tastes of his hearers. Thus, the old heroes of tradition were placed upon prancing horses, clothed in coats of mail, and armed with lances as if they had been vassals of King Henry or King Richard. And in this way the story-teller called up before the minds of the listeners pictures of deeds of chivalry, such as husbands and brothers were performing for

the Christian faith in far-off Palestine. The writers of the time, both English and French, set them down as they heard and knew them, and so in their altered and historically inaccurate form they have reached us at the present day.

One of the most famous of the books compiled by old English writers was the "Historia Britonum," which was written (in Latin) by Geoffrey, Bishop of Asaph. It contained an account of a war which King Arthur waged in Western Europe, but made no mention of the Holy Grail.

From this and other books of romances compiled in England, and very largely, too, from books of French romances, Sir Thomas Malory obtained the material for his "Morte d'Arthur," which was written in 1470. This is the most famous of the early books of Arthurian legend, and it is from the "Morte d'Arthur" that most of the stories in this book are taken. Some, however, are taken from the "High History of the Holy Graal," translated from the French by Dr. Sebastian Evans. The language throughout has been modified with a view to making the legends more easy of study.

PART I

THE DRAWING OF THE SWORD

Long, long ago, after Uther Pendragon died, no king reigned in Britain, and every Knight hoped to seize the crown for himself. The country was like to fare ill when laws were broken on every side, and the corn which was to give bread to the poor was trodden underfoot, and there was none to bring the evildoer to justice. Then, when things were at their worst, came forth Merlin the magician, and fast he rode to the place where the Archbishop of Canterbury had his dwelling. They took counsel together, and agreed that all the lords and gentlemen of Britain should ride to London and meet on Christmas Day, now at hand, in the Great Church. So this was done. And on Christmas morning, as they left the church, they saw in the churchyard a large stone, and on it a bar of steel, and in the steel a naked sword was held, and about it was written in letters of gold, "Whoso pulleth out this sword is by right of birth King of England." They marvelled at these words, and called for the Archbishop, and brought him into

the place where the stone stood. Then those Knights who fain would be King took firm hold of the hilt, and they tugged at the sword with all their might; but it never stirred. The Archbishop watched them in silence, but when they were faint from pulling he spoke: "The man is not here who shall lift out that sword, nor do I know where to find him. But this is my counsel — that two Knights be chosen, good and true men, to keep guard over the sword."

Thus it was done. But the lords and gentlemen-at-arms cried out that every man had a right to try to win the sword, and they decided that on New Year's Day a tournament should be held, and any Knight who would, might enter the lists.

So on New Year's Day, the Knights, according to custom, went to hear service in the Great Church, and after it was over they met in the field to make ready for the tourney¹. Among them was a brave Knight called Sir Ector, who brought with him Sir Kay, his son, and Arthur, Kay's foster-brother. Now Kay had unbuckled his sword the evening before, and in his haste to be at the tourney had forgotten to put it on again, and he begged Arthur to ride back and fetch it for him. But when Arthur reached the house the door was locked, for the women had gone out to see

¹ tourney, tournament; a fight in which many knights joined.

the tourney, and, though Arthur tried his best to get in, he could not. Then he rode away in great anger, and said to himself, "Kay shall not be without a sword this day. I will take that sword in the churchyard, and give it to him;" and he galloped fast till he reached the gate of the churchyard. He jumped down, tied his horse tightly to a tree, and, running up to the sword, seized the handle, and lightly and fiercely drew it out; then he mounted his horse again, and delivered the sword to Sir Kay. The moment Sir Kay saw the sword he knew it was not his own, but the sword of the stone, and he sought out his father Sir Ector, and said to him, "Sir, this is the sword of the stone, therefore I am the rightful King." Sir Ector made no answer, but signed to Kay and Arthur to follow him, and they all three went back to the church. Leaving their horses outside, they entered the choir, and here Sir Ector took a holy book and bade Sir Kay swear how he came by that sword. "My brother Arthur gave it to me," replied Sir Kay. "How did you come by it?" asked Sir Ector, turning to Arthur. "Sir," said Arthur, "when I rode home for my brother's sword, I found no one to deliver it to me, and as I resolved he should not be swordless, I thought of the sword in this stone, and I pulled it out." "Were any Knights present when you did this?" asked Sir Ector. "No, none," said Arthur. "Then you are the rightful King of this land,"

said Sir Ector. "But why am I the King?" inquired Arthur. "Because," answered Sir Ector, "this is an enchanted sword, and no man could draw it but he who was born a King. Therefore put the sword back into the stone, and let me see you take it out." "That is soon done," said Arthur, replacing the sword, and Sir Ector himself tried to draw it, but he could not. "Now it is your turn," he said to Sir Kay, but Sir Kay fared no better than his father, though he tugged with all his might and main. "Now you, Arthur," and Arthur pulled it out as easily as if it had been lying in its sheath, and as he did so Sir Ector and Sir Kay sank on their knees before him. "Why do you, my father and brother, kneel to me?" asked Arthur in surprise. "Nay, nay, my lord," answered Sir Ector, "I am not your father, though till to-day I could not tell you who your father really was. You are the son of Uther Pendragon², and you were brought to me when

² Arthur's parentage. Uther Pendragon was King Arthur's father. In Malory's "Morte d'Arthur," it is explained how he, when King of all England, marched into Cornwall against the powerful Duke of Tintagil. In the siege that followed the Duke of Tintagil was killed, and his lady, the dame Igraine, afterwards became the wife of King Uthur. It is also explained how, on the advice of Merlin, their son Arthur was fostered by the wife of a certain Sir Ector, and brought up with his son Kay. Uther Pendragon died two years after this, and on his deathbed Merlin asked if Arthur should not